MY GREATEST OLYMPIC PRIZE

Jesse Owens

Introducing the author

James Cleveland "Jesse" Owens (1913 - 1980) was an American track and field athlete who specialized in sprints and long jump. He participated in the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, Germany, where he achieved international fame by winning four gold medals: one each in the 100 meters, 200 meters, long jump, and as member of the 4x100 metre relay race team.

Unit I

Warm up

The Olympic Games is the world's foremost sports competition featuring summer and winter sports, in which athletes from all over the world participate in a variety of competitions. In this essay, Jesse Owens shares his experiences of 1936 Summer Olympics held in Berlin when patriotic feelings were running high in Germany. However, Owens did not bother, as he trusted in his abilities. He tells his stunning story about forging a lasting friendship with a German, putting differences aside for the love of the Games.

Read the following unit of the text and note how Owens reacted to the performance of his rival:

The Text

It was the summer of 1936. The Olympic Games were being held in Berlin. Because Adolf Hitler childishly insisted that his performers were members of a "master race," nationalistic feelings were at an all-time high.

I wasn't too worried about all this. I'd trained, sweated and disciplined myself for six years, with the Games in mind. While I was going over on the boat, all I could think about was taking home one or two of those gold medals. I had my eye especially on the long jump. A year before, as a university student, I'd set the world record of 26 feet 8 1/4 inches. Everyone kind of expected me to win that Olympic event hands down.

I was in for a surprise. When the time came for the long-jump trials, I was startled to see a tall boy hitting the pit at almost 26 feet on his practice leaps! He turned out to be a German named Luz Long. I was told that Hitler had kept him under wraps, evidently hoping he would win the jump.

I supposed that if Long won, it would add some new support to the Nazis' Aryan-superiority theory. After all, I am a Negro. A little hot under the collar about Hitler's ways, I determined to go out there and really show Der Führer and his master race who was superior and who wasn't.

Glossary

performers	(here) competitors, athlets
master race	superior to all other races (Hitler's Nazi theory claimed that the Aryan race is a master race)
26 feet 8 1/4 inches	(8.13 metres).
26 feet	(7.9 metres)
(win) hands down	(win) with little or no effort
startled	greatly shocked and surprised
under wraps	secret
Nazis	members of Hitler's the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP)

Aryan-superiority theory the theory that Germans, who are the Aryans, are superior to all other peoples

Der Führer the leader in German(used almost exclusively as the epithet for Hitler)

Think it out

1. Why were nationalistic feelings running high during the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin?
2. 'I wasn't too worried about all this'. What does "this" refer to - Hitler's beliefs or winning a gold medal?
3. Why wasn't Owens worried?
4. Why did everyone expect Owens to win the long jump easily?
5. What was the surprise that awaited Jesse Owens in Berlin?
6. What did he learn from people about Luz Long?
7. Do you think Nazis' Aryan-superiority theory meant that Germans were superior to Negroes? How did Owens feel about it - angry or bothered?
8. What made Owens determined to beat Luz Long?

Unit II

Warm up

Anger is the worst enemy of an athlete. Read the following unit of the text and find out how Owens suffered for his anger, and who bailed him out:

The Text

An angry athlete is an athlete who will make mistakes, as any coach will tell you. I was no exception. On the first of my three qualifying jumps, I leapt from several inches beyond the take-off board for a no-jump. On the second jump, I was even

worse. "Did I come 3000 miles for this?" I thought bitterly. "To fail in the trials and make a fool of myself?"

Walking a few yards from the pit, I kicked disgustedly at the ground. Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to look into the friendly blue eyes of the tall German long jumper. He had easily qualified for the finals on his first attempt. He offered me a firm handshake.

"Jesse Owens, I'm Luz Long. I don't think we've met." He spoke English well, though with a German twist to it.

"Glad to meet you," I said. Then, trying to hide my nervousness, I added, "How are you?"

"I'm fine. The question is: How are you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Something must be eating you," he said - proud the way foreigners are when they've mastered a bit of American slang. "You should be able to qualify with your eyes closed."

"Believe me, I know it," I told him - and it felt good to say that to someone.

For the next few minutes, we talked together. I didn't tell Long what was 'eating' me, but he seemed to understand my anger, and he took pains to reassure me. Although he'd been schooled in the Nazi youth movement, he didn't believe in the Aryan-supremacy business any more than I did. We laughed over the fact that he really looked the part, though. An inch taller than I, he had a lean, muscular frame, clear blue eyes, fair hair and a strikingly handsome, face. Finally, seeing that I had calmed down somewhat, he pointed to the take-off board.

"Look," he said. "Why don't you draw a line a few inches at the back of the board and aim at making your take-off from there? You'll be sure not to foul, and you certainly ought to jump far enough to qualify. What does it matter if you're not first in the trials? Tomorrow is what counts."

Suddenly all the tension seemed to ebb out of my body as the truth of what he said hit me. Confidently, I drew a line a full foot behind the board and proceeded to jump from there. I qualified with almost a foot to spare.

Glossary

eating	agitating
disgustedly	with a strong feeling of dislike
reassure	to say something to make somebody less frightened

Think it out

1. What does a coach say about an angry athlete?
2. What were the results of the first two qualifying jumps for Owens?
3. Why did Owens kick the pit?
4. Who offered Owens a firm handshake? Was he friendly or hostile?
5. Why did Long speak to Owens during the trials? Did he mean to make friendship with Owens or to find out what was troubling him?
6. "he really looked the part" - What does this mean? Does it mean Long was trying to play the part of an Aryan or he looked as if he belonged to a superior race?
7. How did Luz Log help Jesse Owens in qualifying for the final jumps?
8. "Tomorrow is what counts." - What did Long mean by this? Does he mean that Owens would win the next day, or their performance the next day would matter much?
9. Did Owens qualify for the final jump? How did he do that?

Unit III

Warm up

Do you believe in the adage, "A friend in need is a friend indeed"? Read the following unit of the text and note how Owens and Luz Long became good friends:

The Text

That night I walked over to Luz Long's room in the Olympic village to thank him. I knew that if it hadn't been for him I probably wouldn't be jumping in the finals the following day. We sat in his quarters and talked for two hours - about track and field, ourselves, the world situation, and a dozen other things.

When I finally got up to leave, we both knew that a real friendship had been formed. Luz would go out to the field the next day trying to beat me if he could. But I knew that he wanted me to do my best - even if that meant my winning.

As it turned out, Luz broke his own past record. In doing so, he pushed me on to a peak performance. I remember that at the instant I landed from my final jump - the one which set the Olympic record of 26 feet 5 1/4 inches - he was at my side, congratulating me. Despite the fact that Hitler glared at us from the stands not a hundred yards away, Luz shook my hand hard - and it wasn't a fake ''smile with a broken heart'' sort of grip, either.

You could melt down all the gold medals and cups I have, and they wouldn't be a plating on the 24-carat friendship I felt for Luz Long at that moment.

I realised then, too, that Luz was the epitome of what Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, must have had in mind when he said, ''The important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part. The essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well.''

Glossary

peak performance	best ever performance
26 feet 5 1/4 inches	(8.06 metres)
24-carat friendship	genuine friendship
plating	a thin coating
epitome	a perfect example

Think it out

1. When did Owens and Long realize that they had become friends?
2. Who was Coubertin? What was his ideal?
3. Why has Luz Long been called a fine example of Coubertin's ideal?
4. What do you think was the greatest Olympic Prize for Jesse Owens - the gold medal he won in long jump , or the friendship he formed with Luz Long?

Post-reading activities

Doing with words

(a) 'Childish' is an adjective. We can make it an adverb by adding 'ly' - 'childishly'. Now add 'ly' to make the following adjectives adverbs:

easy, real, bitter, disgusted, clear , physical , friend, final ,certain , sudden

(b) Replace the italicized words in each of the following sentences with idiomatic expressions given in brackets:

(an all-time high, hands down, under wraps, hot under the collar, look the part)

i. The plan was carefully kept *secret.*

ii. Tendulkar's double century is *the highest ever* individual score in a one-day cricket match.

iii. You'd never guess he was a security guard; he doesn't *appear to be suited to the job.*

iv. Delhi daredevils won the IPL cup *very easily.*

v. The policeman was *very angry* because the criminal escaped.

(c) Make sentences of your own using the following expressions :

i. Make a fool of oneself

ii. have one's eye on

iii. (to be) in for a surprise

iv. ebb out

v. no exception